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SUBJECT: Saudi Science Research - Gathering Strength

¶1. Summary: Academic and scientific researchers in Saudi Arabia are hungry for more contact with American counterparts and believe that the Saudi research system is increasingly operating up to international standards. Improved education and upcoming research opportunities for women, including the opening of the first research center in the Kingdom for female scientists, are just two areas cited by Saudis as signs of progress in the science & technology sector. Visa problems are seen as an obstacle to improving scientific and academic cooperation with the United States. A senior official at Saudi Arabia's leading research institute noted that Saudi scientists are increasingly looking to Asia for research links. This official suggested that expanding S&T cooperation be put on the agenda of the U.S.-Saudi Strategic Dialogue Initiative. End summary.

¶2. Amman-based regional ESTH Officer and econ offs visited Saudi research institutions in late March to assess the status of science and research in the Kingdom. In separate meetings, officers met Dr. Mammoth Gari, Acting Director of the King Fahd Medical Research Center at Jeddah's King Abdulaziz University; HRH Prince Turki Al-Saud, Vice Chairman of Research Institutes at the King Abdulaziz City for Science and Technology (KACST) in Riyadh; and Engineer Ali Risheh, a Jordanian working at King Saud University's Prince Sultan Center for Water, Environment and Desert Studies, also in Riyadh.

King Abdulaziz City for S&T Combines Several Functions

¶3. HRH Prince Turki described KACST as an amalgam of the NIH, NSF, NAS, NIST and other U.S. Government research labs. He listed some of the research centers within the King Abdulaziz City for Science and Technology (KACST): a center for study of the natural environment, an air pollution monitoring center, a seismology center, a space research institute (including remote sensing and Geographic Information Systems), and an energy institute (including research on renewable energy sources). Altogether, Turki said, KACST has 1,500 staff, including 150 PhDs, 150 with Master degrees, and a bevy of trained engineers and technicians. KACST is expanding and HRH Prince Turki expects the staff to double, but he did not specify a target date. KACST's budget, all provided through

government funding, is approximately SR 600 million (160 million USD). KACST maintains its own labs and gives grants to other research facilities as well. There are fifteen universities in Saudi Arabia, he said, and a government goal is to develop centers of excellence in all the universities.

Saudis Expanding Global S&T Contacts

¶4. The SAG has a national S&T strategy, Prince Turki said, and is looking for joint projects. KACST has had several productive relationships with U.S. institutions, including NASA, MIT, University of Michigan and Stanford. He commented that he is interested in keeping alive KACST's cooperation with U.S. institutions, but that the relationship "is not the way we want it." US-Saudi cooperation in research should be "simple and fast," Turki said, but it currently is not. He suggested that S&T issues be put on the agenda of the U.S.-Saudi Strategic Dialogue. He noted that Saudi Arabia is now developing research ties in Asia, a part of the world that previously did not get much attention from Saudis.

Islam Not a Barrier to Cutting Edge Science

¶5. When asked about the relationship of Islam to carrying out cutting edge science projects, such as genetic transfer research, each of the various

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interlocutors told emboffs that there was no inherent conflict, with the sole exception of working with genes from swine or mice in experiments. Beyond that narrow exception, all dismissed any Islamic religious barriers to scientific research, even in such controversial areas as stem cells and transgenics.

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Medical Researcher Wants to Do Stem Cell Research

¶6. Dr. Mamdooh Gari, the Acting Director of the King Fahd Medical Research Center at Jeddah's King Abdulaziz University, said that his center currently focuses on genetic medicine, molecular biology and virology, including work on HIV/AIDS and dengue fever, and will open a stem cell research center in the future. Ninety percent of the researchers at the King Fahd Medical Research Center are Saudis, Dr. Gari estimated. One of Dr. Gari's tasks has been to establish ethical guidelines on such topics as medical research involving human subjects. He commented that he feels King Abdulaziz University has high standards for its engineering and science programs, equivalent to the United Kingdom, where he earned his own PhD. Gari also noted that the basic curriculum plan for the university is based on an American model.

Women and Research

¶7. HRH Prince Turki said that KACST is creating a Center for Women's Research, i.e. a center in which female scientists can carry out research. This is the first research laboratory open to women scientists in the Kingdom, who otherwise do not have access to the male only KACST facility. Construction will begin in 2006, he said. The facility will include labs for biology, information technology, and nanotechnology.

¶8. Dr. Gari said that cultural factors are a particular obstacle for Saudi women who wish to study abroad. Men go overseas more often and with fewer objections from their families. Gari teaches medical technology to gender-segregated classes, and had high praise for the commitment and study habits of Saudi women compared to their male counterparts.

Saudis World View Changing: We're On a Fast Track

¶9. HRH Prince Turki was unambiguous and optimistic about the future of research in Saudi Arabia. He said Saudi Arabia is on a "fast track" towards high technology and "everyone is jumping in," government, business and academia. He commented that there is "momentum" in the development of knowledge-based industries. The Saudi Arabian General Investment Authority (SAGIA) is investing its resources into promotion and support of various trade sectors, he said, which is a catalyst for bringing in knowledge-based industries. He added that a Small and Medium-sized Enterprise Fund was recently approved, which would spur technological development as well.

¶10. All those with whom emboffs spoke felt that Saudi Arabia's academic system has developed quickly and is moving towards more practical work that will meet the needs of the country. They recognized that in order to achieve practical results, Saudi institutions and scientists must cooperate and collaborate with international institutions. For example, Dr. Gari is interested in establishing a program for post-doctoral Saudis to study abroad. Many of the researchers and medical technicians have studied abroad, he said, but tend to stop after reaching the doctorate level.

¶11. Engineer Ali Rishah, a Jordanian working at King Saud University's Prince Sultan Center for Water, Environment, and Desert Studies, said that he has seen Saudi Arabia open up dramatically during his 17 years

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of residence. The very concept of education has changed, he said. Saudi students now have more responsibility for their own education, and students are more connected to the outside world via databases and on-line research.

Visas Delayed Are Visas Denied

¶12. There was widespread comment that visa issues, both real and perceived, continue to bedevil the US-Saudi S&T relationship. The process for obtaining U.S. visas was widely criticized as slow. Common horror stories included tales of waiting months for approvals with no indication of when a decision will be made and having children and spouses approved for visas, while the principal applicant was delayed. Prince Turki said that the current visa process is an obstacle to building a good working relationship in the S&T area. The U.S. Government continues to see Saudi Arabia as a terrorist country, he complained. Emboffs emphasized the USG commitment to legitimate, secure travel and the USG's ongoing work to eliminate unnecessary delays in the visa process. Emboffs pointed out that Saudi travelers could help themselves in the process by applying early and becoming familiar with the process by looking at the Embassy website.

¶13. Comment: The confidence of the Saudi interlocutors in their ability to reach and maintain global standards in research and in S&T was striking. Given the

increased funds available to a Saudi Government flush with higher oil revenues, it is certainly likely Saudi's S&T sector will grow in size and in its ability to achieve world-class standards of research in certain selected fields. Post concurs that looking at ways to increase S&T cooperation - and allowing U.S. researchers to partake in Saudi S&T largesse - may be a useful item for discussion under the Strategic Dialogue Initiative. End Comment.

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